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Rudi Matthee



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- 1 This is an excellent contribution to a long neglected field that is now beginning to receive scholarly attention: border studies of Islamic empires. Discussing the Kurdish groups that straddled the Ottoman-Safavid border in the 17th century, the author focuses on their role in state-to-state relations. Far from being simply subordinated to their respective empires, he argues, these groups were able to take advantage of the fluidity of the frontier zone to gain considerable independence and remarkable freedom of action. This was especially true at times of war, when tribal groups were expected to cooperate with the empire to which they were nominally beholden. Military activity in the border region would not necessarily lead to greater central state control, though. Rather, it gave greater prestige to tribal leaders, and it tended to enhance their ability to wield influence and gain autonomy inasmuch as their men performed vital functions as spies, go-betweens and guardians of the border. The fact that the enemy empire was just as eager to enlist the border peoples further enhanced their leeway. The shah might suppress dissident tribes and deport their leaders, but he had to worry about their defection, and long-term

loyalty was typically bought with concessions toward far-reaching autonomy and monetary inducement. The upshot of it all was not a diminution but an elevation of tribal power in the 17th century. The *divide et impera* strategy that is typically attributed to the center vis-à-vis the periphery thus worked the other way around as well.

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Thèmes : 4.2.1. Safavides et Qâjârs

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